

## ENSURING FOOD SECURITY FOR WOMEN - LIBERIA

### *Context*

In post-conflict Liberia, it is estimated that 76.2 percent of Liberians live in absolute poverty and 52 percent live in extreme poverty. Only 53.9 percent of the eligible population is employed and women account for 39.9 percent of the formal labor force. Agriculture is the main income generating activity with approximately 70 percent of the population depending on agriculture for their livelihood.

Cassava, an important staple crop for all Liberians, is seen as a woman's crop. Women perform almost all activities relating to cassava production and sale; from planting and tending fields to harvest, processing, and marketing. Cassava is currently grown for household use, and for sale; the money from sales of cassava is considered to be the income of the woman of the household. However, women are faced with significant challenges which constrain their productivity and ability to earn substantial income from cassava production. Some of the challenges and constraints include the lack of appropriate processing equipment, transport to market, basic farming tools and the inability to afford necessary inputs for optimal production.

### *Purpose*

The Results Based Initiative (RBI) Liberia Project "Value-Added Cassava Enterprise for the Ganta Concern Women's Group (GCWG)" is a project whose aim is to contribute to the Liberian national strategic objectives of reducing poverty and increasing women's economic empowerment. Specifically, **the RBI is working with the Ganta Concern Women's Group (GCWG)** to support the development of their small-scale women's cassava production operation into an income-generating cassava production and processing enterprise. The project has five major components which include strengthening of the cassava production, processing and marketing, strengthening organizational development and capacity building of GCWG and undertaking a rigorous impact evaluation.

The RBI intends to demonstrate that: (i) **women are good entrepreneurs** and can play an important role in the growth of the agricultural sector and an investment in women cassava producers can contribute significantly to the growth of the cassava industry in Liberia and poverty reduction at the household level; and, (ii) **women's economic empowerment projects can contribute to positive changes in gender relations** at household and community level. The project also intends to show that the RBI methodology can be replicated and used to enhance women's contribution to economic growth.

### *Results*

The project is expected to have an impact at three levels. At the individual level, RBI activities are expected to lead to increased economic security and livelihoods. At the household level, RBI activities will empower women, allowing them to take leadership and control of resources at household level and participate in enterprise activities. Finally, at the community and policy level, the increased cassava production will contribute to promoting the cassava enterprise as a vehicle for growth and poverty reduction.

### Key Statistics

- 68% of Liberia's rural population and 55% of the urban population, live on less than US\$1 a day.
- In 2006, 11% of all households in Liberia were completely food insecure, while 40% of rural households were considered 'highly vulnerable' to food insecurity.



### General Information

Liberia is in West Africa and has a population of approximately 3,476,000 people. Liberia's president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, became the first elected female head of state in Africa in 2005 and has pledged, among other things, to improve the status of women in Liberia.

Liberia was founded during the nineteenth century by the union of two private American colonies comprised of freed slaves. The constitution was based on that of the USA and English remains its official language.

Between 1989 and 2003 Liberia experienced a devastating civil war, which displaced 86% of households and significantly damaged basic infrastructure, particularly education and health services and economic systems. The civil war exacerbated already poor living and economic conditions in Liberia and has severely hindered any progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The United Nations remain in Liberia as a peace keeping force, helping to re-establish political, economic and social stability.

### Liberia's economy

Liberia's economy is a free-enterprise, market system. Agriculture is the main source of income for the state, accounting for 58% of Liberia's GDP in 2003. However, Liberia is still significantly reliant on food, particularly rice, imports for consumption. Liberia is far from food secure and continues to suffer from the long term food crisis.

36% of the population rely on agriculture for their livelihood. The crops Liberia produces are primarily rice, cassava, bananas and vegetables. Agricultural production levels have increased since the end of the war but are, in some cases, still not at the level they were before the war. This indicates the level of destruction to infrastructure and property that the war caused and the reason for the severe food crisis Liberia faces.

Access to markets, land and seeds and improvements in infrastructure are necessary in order to improve Liberia's food security crisis and make its economy competitive in world markets. Infrastructure initiatives are currently being developed by the World Bank, which is investing over US\$126 million in Liberia. These projects range from good governance and economic policies to the reconstruction of local communities, which is necessary for Liberia's post-war recovery.

### Cassava

Cassava is the developing world's fourth most important crop. Resembling a sweet potato, the roots are high in carbohydrates and the leaves provide about the same amount of protein as an egg. It can be used to make flour, gum, animal feed, starch and paper. It can also be fermented to make farina (gari), a granulated product, which can last several months, cassava chips and fufu, all of which are usually sold at markets.

Cassava is an important crop for Africa because of its ability to be grown easily and not be affected by drought. Unlike rice, it can be harvested in the rainy season, when hunger levels are at their highest in Liberia. It grows well in poorer soils and does not require much fertiliser as its leaves fall, providing its own organic fertiliser. This also makes it less vulnerable to fluctuating fuel prices.

In an average year a farmer harvests about 2 tonnes of maize per hectare. A cassava crop, on the other hand, will produce 3 times as much food. Scientists are currently producing new strains of cassava which are more resistant to local pests, drought and which can be harvested quicker. It is important that farmers, globally, have access to these new seeds in order to produce enough food for their families and to provide a reasonable income.

### Definition:

*Food insecurity exists when people do not have physical, social and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active life. (FAO)*

### What is Food Security?

Food security encompasses three main factors:

- Food accessibility
- Food availability
- Food utilisation

All of these must be adequately addressed in order for a country to be food secure. For example, a country can produce enough food to feed its population, but will not be food secure if areas do not have access to the food, whether that be financial or physical access. Similarly on a global scale, it is arguable that there is enough food produced to adequately feed everyone. The problem is distribution. There are also often food security disparities within countries, usually between rural and urban populations, as rural are able to grow their own food, while urban populations rely on rural or imported supplies.

In today's economic climate, countries are usually only considered food secure if they are self-sufficient and are able to participate in the global markets. That is, they have enough food to export and enough income in import.

### Consequences of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity impacts all aspects of a society, particularly vulnerable groups such as children, women and the elderly. Its direct results include: malnutrition and micronutrient diseases, particularly anaemia and vitamin A deficiency. These affects are particularly detrimental to maternal health, especially if left untreated, and may result in maternal mortality.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation for the UN estimated that at the end of 2008 there were 963 million undernourished people worldwide (FAO 2008). FAO has recently suggested that by the end of 2009 this figure will have risen significantly, to 1.02 billion (FAO 2009). It is essential to note that of this number only 15 million live in developed countries.

### Current Food Crisis

The current food crisis resulted in a significant rise in global food prices, particularly grain. It was caused by a combination of increase in demand and a decrease in supply. The primary factor which contributed to the demand was the rise of the biofuels industry. Another minor contributor is the urbanisation of China's population, which has led to a reduction of rice production and an increase in the global rice demand as China is forced to import significant amounts of rice.

The drop in supply was mainly caused by the affects weather issues and natural disasters. For example, after the cyclone in Myanmar, local food prices rose significantly as the majority of the country's rice patties were destroyed, thus affecting the global rice supply.

The rise in food prices, combined with the current global economic crisis, has resulted in a significant increase in the number of undernourished and malnourished people world wide.

### Food security and the MDGs

*Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger*

All of the MDGs are inextricably linked. Hunger and malnutrition prevent people from working, going to school, caring for their families and causes severe complications during pregnancy. There are also direct links between poverty, hunger and agricultural production.

The majority of the world's population rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, but it is also these farmers that are the most vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger. Small scale farmers, with limited access to markets, technology and information are the most vulnerable. Increasing income-generating options for farmers, by increasing access to markets, seeds and technology, is essential in eradicating poverty and hunger. This in turn will lead to a greater availability of food, more income and a general reduction of poverty.

Equal access to land, credit and good infrastructure is also essential. It has been shown that females producing an income are more likely to spend it on their family's welfare, particularly food and education, than male headed households. It is difficult, however, for women to obtain access to land, seeds and micro-financing.

### The impact of climate change on food security

Climate change has the ability to seriously impact the food security of the majority of the global population. The effects of climate change, such as rising sea levels, rises in global temperatures and the increased frequency of natural disasters, will all directly impact global food production and the availability of natural resources.

The erosion of coast lines and rising sea levels will significantly decrease the amount of arable land in several countries. Also, rising sea temperatures will result in the extinction of several species of fish, which will lower fishing levels. In terms of agricultural impacts, climate change may result in drier conditions in certain areas of the world which will further limit the amount of arable land for farming. An increase in natural disasters and the irregular rain patterns is already affecting regions and contributed to the global food crisis.

It is essential that farmers globally are educated about the impacts of climate change on their agricultural practises. New seeds are currently being developed which will be able to withstand long periods of drought and it is vital that farmers in developing countries have access to them, or climate change will have a devastating affect on the developing world.

### Case Study: Liberia

In 2006, 11% of Liberian households were completely food insecure, while 40% of rural households were considered 'highly vulnerable' to food insecurity. There are several factors which cause these figures, namely the devastating civil war, a large scale lack of access to food, low agricultural productivity and limited market access due to poor road networks.

### Causes of the food crisis

Liberia's food crisis has been primarily the result of the fourteen year civil war the country endured between 1989 and 2003, which led to the breakdown of infrastructure throughout the country. Nearly 1 million Liberians were displaced due to the war and it is those displaced families that remain the most vulnerable to food insecurity. Upon their return home, they were challenged with rebuilding their farms from scratch in an unstable political and economic environment.

Liberians generally have a very limited access to food, unless they produce it themselves. These limitations are principally economic and physical. The population has very

limited income-generation opportunities in all economic sectors, particularly the agricultural sector, making it difficult for households to escape poverty and hunger. The poor nature of the Liberian road network is also a problem, as the journey to the markets is difficult during the dry season, but in the wet season it is impossible. It is the urban population, who rely on the markets and the produce of the rural population to survive, who suffer during these periods.

### UNIFEM's Action

The global food crisis has had a devastating affect on the developing world. It is essential for international organisations to recognise the essential causes of food crises and target those problems. UNIFEM is undertaking a project which is intended to promote women's empowerment in Liberia and support the development of women's participation in the agricultural sector, particularly through the growth of cassava.

The project will entail the transfer of 48 acres of land to the Ganta Concern Women's Group (GCWG), which has been divided into ten community farms and they will legally own for five years. The project will also ensure relevant technology and information, as well as seeds, are also provided. The challenges to food security and agriculture in Liberia, namely access to land, technology and information, are being addressed by UNIFEM in this project and it is hoped that promoting the empowerment of women, particularly in economically, will be beneficial for Liberia's entire population.

### Useful Links

<http://www.fao.org/>

<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

### References

Joachim von Braun, M. S. Swaminathan and Mark W. Rosegrant, *Agriculture, Food Security, Nutrition and the Millenium Development Goals* (2004).

Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, *Climate Change and Food Security: A Framework Document*, (2008).

Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, *Food Security Statistics: Liberia*, (2006).

### Climate change in Liberia

Liberia's agricultural sector will be seriously threatened by climate change, according to President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf at the opening of the 2009 Consultation on Climate Change, Human Rights, Peace and Security in Monrovia. Climate change, particularly rising temperatures, will also significantly impact livestock production and the availability of water throughout Africa. The Consultation will discuss methods of combating climate change within Liberia and establish education programs for farmers about repercussions of climate change.

Liberia is already experiencing the erosion of its coastline, which is home to over 50% of the population. This may well result in the displacement of a significant proportion of the population, which could ignite more political unrest. The Natural Disaster Relief Commission is also being re-established to provide education to citizens regarding emergency procedures during disasters. As the global temperature rises, an increased number of natural disasters and irregular weather patterns are expected and will have harmful consequences on agricultural production.

The Consultation will also discuss the ways in which to educate Liberia's population on the causes of climate change and what they can do to prevent it. Some current farming practices are producing considerable amounts of carbon dioxide. For example, farmers regularly burn large areas of grasslands in order to remove crop stubble and revitalise the soil. The timber industry, which is a vital source of income in Liberia, is also contributing to emissions.

### Liberia and the MDGs

The civil war set back any achievements made before 1989 to eradicate poverty in Liberia. At this stage there is only a very weak chance that Liberia will achieve the majority of the MDGs.

Since the end of the war, Liberia's situation has hardly improved. For example, in 2001, 76.2% of the population lived on less than US\$1 a day. In 2007 this figure had significantly increased to 83.7% of the population and it is likely that with the recent food and financial crises this figure would not have decreased.

Liberia's food crisis and the civil war have also resulted in rising maternal mortality rates and decreasing education enrolment rates, particularly for girls. In 1990 there were 560 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births and in 2005 the World Health Organisation (WHO) stated there were 1200. The 2015 target is 65 deaths per 100,000 live births and it is unlikely that Liberia will achieve this. This is

directly linked to the rise in poverty and hunger during the war, as well as the destruction of infrastructure, primarily access to adequate health care during this period.

Despite the food-for-education initiative, primary education enrolment rates have not improved significantly, probably due to the recent global crises. This is a World Food Programme and UNICEF initiative which involves hot food rations for students during recess periods, take home rations for female students in grades 4-6 who achieve an attendance record of 80% of a calendar month and basic health education for students. During the 2001 to 2002 period Liberia's net enrolment ratio in primary education was 34.7%, while in 2007 it was 37.3%. The ratio of girls has increased significantly, from 14.5% in 2002 to 37.1% in 2007. This will, in time, have a positive impact on other MDG indicators, particularly maternal mortality rates.

Liberia's election of a female president is a very positive sign in the promotion of women's empowerment within the country and Africa. Between 1997 and 2006 the number of women in parliament more than doubled from 5.7% to 14%. The education of women will lead to a further increase in this statistic and will also support the fight against HIV/AIDS.

### Useful links

<http://www.republicofliberia.org/Inglese/index.htm>

<http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unmil/>

<http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/>

### References

Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, *Cassava Production and Utilisation in Liberia*, (1986)

James Teft, *Agricultural policy and Food Security in Liberia*, (2005).

The United Nations Development Program, *Liberia's Progress Towards the Millennium Development Goals*, (2008).

The World Bank, *The World Bank's Engagement in Liberia*, (2008).

World Food Programme, *A Report from the Office of Evaluation: Full Report of the Evaluation of the Liberia PRRO 10454.0*, (2009).